

Come Back and Haunt Me (Follow Me Home) by a little more light

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Summary: "She's crying again, because she is exhausted and worried out of her mind, but she isn't alone anymore." Joyce, over time. [Begins pre-s1, ends slightly post-s2.]

Come Back and Haunt Me (Follow Me Home)

It took five drafts and several months to make me not hate this thing.

There are basically no Joyce-centric fics out there, which is a shame.

Joyce has to go back to work when Will is two, because it turns out Lonnie has been gambling on most of his trips to the city, and it's finally bitten him in the ass.

There are nights when she has to go without dinner so her kids can eat, and then one night her aunt shows up on their doorstep, rambling about "the voices," and Joyce isn't even surprised, because of course this would happen at the worst possible time.

She's always heard the things people in town whisper about her, and she's never cared. Now she just hopes they leave her kids out of it.

x

Jim moves back into town after nine years away, more if you count the war. His daughter is dead and his wife has left him, and the town gossips are all tripping over themselves for details, but this is more than enough for Joyce. They have both lost their parents; she can't imagine losing a child.

She never sees him, which is probably for the best. He becomes chief of police, and no one calls him Jim anymore.

x

She puts up with a lot of shit from Lonnie—the gambling, the lies, the drinking, because she's too exhausted, too busy just trying to make ends meet to even *think* about dealing with the messy divorce process. But when Lonnie moves to hit Jonathan for daring to tell him that *maybe you shouldn't treat Will like shit, you selfish bastard*, Joyce sees red. Jonathan is almost fourteen, but he is still her baby.

She engages Lonnie in a screaming match that sends both of the boys running off to hide, and doesn't cease until the chief of police himself shows up at the door.

"Hop," she says, and it's strange and bitter and sad not to call him by his first name.

"Joyce," he says with a nod.

"Who the hell sent you?" Lonnie demands.

"One of your boys called." Hopper steps through the doorway. He doesn't say anything more, but he gives Joyce a look that clearly asks what's been going on.

She weighs her options. Lonnie hasn't hit her, didn't succeed in hitting Jonathan; there isn't anything she could pin him on. But she could use this brief respite to get the boys out. It's a school night, and God knows the screaming won't do them any good.

"We're okay," she says. "I was just going to take the boys somewhere for the night."

"I'll give you an escort," he says, sending a glare in Lonnie's direction.

As Joyce passes her husband on her way to get the boys, she hears him mutter something disdainful about "pigs."

Hopper's only been back for about half a year, and already he's built up a reputation as a womanizing, usually-hungover asshole. But he hands Joyce extra cash when she comes up short at the motel, and she thinks her old friend is still in there somewhere, buried under layers of grief.

x

The divorce process is messy, but she finally manages to kick Lonnie out. He ends up having to sell the auto shop to help pay his debts, and moves out of town.

She has no money, and the boys have no dad, but they finally have peace.

"Good goddamn riddance," Jonathan declares.

x

Will can't be dead, he *isn't* dead.

She *talked* to him, for Christ's sake.

"Listen, Joyce. After Sara . . ."

She doesn't hear anything he's saying, not really. Will isn't Sara, isn't her mother or father; he isn't sick or dying or dead. He is missing, but he is here, and nothing makes sense but damn it if she won't find a way to bring him home.

"I don't care if anyone believes me!" she shouts at Jonathan, and she has never felt lonelier in her life.

x

"*You were right.*"

The words seem to echo around her, and she's crying again, because she is exhausted and worried out of her goddamn mind, but she isn't alone anymore. From what she understands, he broke into a government facility simply because a tiny part of him believed her.

And then it hits her just how reckless the whole thing was, and the old Joyce would have scolded him, but whoever the hell she is now is just tired and so, so grateful.

x

After everything, she sleeps.

Will stays with her, and she holds him tight.

x

Somewhere in between all of Will's appointments and Joyce's own nightmares, she runs into Bob Newby.

And he is normal, so blessedly normal, and she'd have loved him

even before she walked into a monster-infested alternate dimension to save her baby boy, because she'd thought her life was insane already. He would have been a beacon then, but he is a lifeline now; a hope of what life could be like someday in the future.

"How's, uh, Bob the Brain?"

"Don't call him that."

x

He's good.

We're good.

And, mostly, they are.

x

He is talking of moving away, but he still doesn't know that more often than not, all three of them wake screaming at night. And he certainly doesn't know why.

"This isn't a normal family."

"It could be."

It's then she starts to wonder if they are doomed.

x

"I think he's going to die."

What little sense she still has flies out the window, and she knows that if she leaves Hawkins, a part of her will stay here. Jim (or Hop, or something; she doesn't know what to call him in her mind these days) is the only person who understands exactly what she's been through, and he's just as involved in all of it as she is. If she were to leave, and some unknown terror hunted him down, she wouldn't be able to live with herself, not when she knows she's the only person who can save him.

Save him, save him.

It runs deeper than their friendship. Almost like family, something like love—

What the hell, Joyce?

x

Bob and his wonderful-but-currently-goddamn-irritating normalcy getting in the way of the ticking clock.

He leaves graciously, at least. Or starts to.

Puzzles . . .

She feels guilty and relieved at once. "Bob!"

Bob and his wonderful-and-surprisingly-goddamn-useful normalcy. Or, rather, nerdiness.

But then, when you have normalcy, you have time for that sort of thing.

x

"What's Jim doin' here?"

If only he knew.

But she is glad he doesn't.

x

"Oh my God, Hopper, are you okay?"

"Joyce . . ."

She holds on to him for a minute just to make sure that he's real and he's safe, and he holds on to her.

Something like love—

Knock it off.

They let go almost simultaneously, and she wonders if he was thinking the same thing.

x

The truth, or much of it, comes out, and Bob is being so understanding even though he doesn't really *understand*.

"Bob Newby, superhero," he says, as if it's a grand adventure.

He doesn't know about the monstrous hole in her house, or a certain telekinetic little girl, or that the chief of police has broken into government facilities for her and would do so again in a heartbeat. But she knows he would continue to be understanding even though he doesn't really *understand*, and something about this fact breaks her heart. She decides that for now, at least, he will not have to know these things.

"Kind of makes my idea of moving to Maine sound a little less crazy, right?"

"Oh, it's not crazy at all."

It isn't.

But maybe she is.

x

"It's gonna be okay."

No one can promise that.

"Remember: Bob Newby, superhero."

She needs to stop this premature-crying nonsense.

x

He stops to smile at her . . .

She smiles back, though her brain is screaming *Let's go!* because they aren't free yet—

It only takes a second, and then she's screaming out loud, and then she's going to rip the damn monsters apart with her bare hands even though she knows it's too late.

"He's gone!" Jim tells her, and her mind knows but her body has not caught up.

Then suddenly she's numb, and Mike has to hold her upright for the rush to the car.

x

She has done enough crying in front of Jim Hopper. She is not going to do it again, and certainly not while the fate of their town (and possibly the world) is at stake.

He sits with her, and she's grateful. It's comforting to sit with someone who just *knows*. He leaves after a bit, because the clock is ticking and they need a plan, but he doesn't begrudge her a few more minutes alone.

Come on, Joyce, she tells herself. Fate of the world.

"Bob Newby, superhero."

She chokes on her tears.

x

She'll kill the damn monster herself if she has to.

But she doesn't have to, says this little group of misfits, and suddenly everyone has a job to do and they're going to figure this out because they have to.

Because we have to.

x

The Mind Flayer is dead and Will is free and Eleven is back and *there's a dead monster in Joyce's fridge* and they all need to sleep for ten years at least. But not before Joyce properly patches up the Harrington kid and gives him a long hug and someone ends up ordering takeout at four in the morning.

She distributes blankets and pillows and tells everyone to just crash here, because anyone who can drive is on the verge of passing out, including her.

In her last bit of consciousness as she's falling asleep, she remembers that most of these kids have actual parents—

But they've just saved the world and Bob Newby is dead and her body will not move, and sleep claims her.

x

The aftermath (post-initial exhaustion) is the hardest part.

Joyce and her boys begin waking screaming from a whole new set of nightmares, and though this second time around they have a better idea of how to cope, it isn't any easier.

She and Jim have to help the rest of the kids and teens cope too, because none of their parents can know what's happened. The whole of Hawkins is definitely talking crap about how often the two of them are together, and Joyce finds herself thinking, *If only they knew*, but she is grateful they don't.

She's also trying to cope with the grief of Bob's death, and the guilt; she feels guilty in more ways than she can express. She has to look his parents in the eyes at his funeral, knowing she dragged him into her chaotic hell-scape of a life, and that she couldn't even keep her head straight when it came to . . .

Things I can't think about now.

Jim stands beside her, a comforting hand on her back. "You can't blame yourself, Joyce."

If only he knew.

She is grateful he doesn't.

x

"Every day, it does get a little easier."

Then his arm is around her, and people would *definitely* talk, if anyone were around to see.

She wishes she could fade away.

Then her free hand finds his in an odd almost-but-not-quite hug, and she thinks of her kids and his kid in that ridiculous Snow Ball (and of all the others who have their own parents but are also kind of their kids, in a way), having a chance to be normal, ridiculous kids, and the weight inside her is lightened a bit.

x

As the weeks and months go by, she sees her formerly-lonely, too-often-terrifying house become everyone's favorite stop.

Nancy and Jonathan seem to like just sitting together, calm and quiet and safe. Steve's basically made himself into Dustin's honorary big brother, and he swings by with the kids most days after school. Sometimes he puts store-bought cookie dough in the oven, and he always asks Joyce how she's doing when she gets home from work. Once, he asks if she minds the cookies, and she laughs and tells him they're worlds better than monsters in the fridge.

And Jim . . . After everything that's happened, she doubts there'll ever be a day when they don't see each other, which is perfectly all right with her, because in the craziness that accompanies saving-the-world-with-and-then-sort-of-unofficially-adopting an odd group of kids, his presence is the only thing that makes sense. They've both lost too much, so it starts with them just wanting to confirm *hey, you're still here, thank God*. It turns into soft exchanges of *hey, how are you doing, how was your day*, followed by him stealing a couple of Steve's cookies to take home to El.

One rainy day during spring break, they somehow all end up together again, even El. The kids gather to watch movies while she and Jim

sip coffee at the kitchen table. There are no monsters to fight, and they are all happy to just be together.

Almost everyone in this little group is alone in some way, *But*, she realizes, *we've all got each other*. It's more than she's ever had.

"You good?" Jim asks her.

The rain is steady and the house is warm, and she hears Steve dutifully shush someone in the living room.

"I'm good," she says.

She means it.